

The Poetics of Transformation *by Jan Lee Ande*

What transformation are poets called upon to make at this critical time in the world's history? How do we transform our anger, our prejudices, our drive toward destruction, into poems and a presence that awaken us to the sanctity of life? How do we use creativity to urge us toward revolutionizing our lives and world? What is the language in which poets might talk about a continuum of change?

Muriel Rukeyser devoted her life to poetry and believed in its ability to transfigure people and planet. She searched for a grammar, a syntax and diction, of conversion. Writing about the time during World War II, she says:

I needed a language of transformation. I needed a language of a changing phase for the poem. And I needed a language that was not static, that did not see life as a series of points, but more as a language of water....Moving past one phase of one's own life--transformation, and moving past impossibilities....That meaning is a religious meaning. And a very common plain one too. (xxii)

How does change come about? Is it drawn out and transitional? Or does it happen straightaway, like a tarantula stepping from its skin--so effortless it appears for an instant as though there are two tarantulas? It may well be that transformation has immediacy to it rather than a mutational or evolutionary quality. An instantaneous

regeneration may occur. We step through a veil into a more luminous space and time. We see ourselves connected with the world. We inhabit a moment of grace: we are changed in an instant. At such times, transformation appears as a gift, a cryptic mystery.

Jiddu Krishnamurti knows that the transformation of the person can happen quite suddenly, as a product of pure and humble attention. Pupul Jayakar, a longtime associate of Krishnamurti's, offers insight into such change:

Seeing and listening to the fact directly--innocently, without thought seeking to change or alter the fact, a nonoperation of thought or will on the deep roots of hate, anger, greed, fear--dissolves the state. There is a transformation in the nature of matter as anger or fear and the release of an energy held in these states, an energy untouched by time and, therefore, not subject to its laws. (Jayakar 111)

In Canto XXXIII of The Divine Comedy reference is made to the influence and authority of love. In line 146 of the Paradiso, Dante tells us love is the motive force behind the workings of the sun and stars. (Ciardi 601) Perhaps it is true that love is the driving power of the universe, pushing planets, suns, comets, the mysterious dark matter. It flows in, around and through, making all things move. We are told in I John 4 that God is love, and perfect love banishes fear. We cannot love the divine while hating our brothers and sisters in the great chain of being that stretches from prokaryotes (primal cells) to angels.

Possibly the earth--roots and rivers and creatures--is God's body, as some new scientists, mystics, poets, and traditional peoples have intuited. Maybe God's body extends through this solar system, out into our spiral galaxy and beyond, throughout this universe, and maybe many more.

Neurons talk to one another by way of synapses, tiny threads of connection. Cells talk to cells. The thread of God spun throughout connecting cells, organs and systems, beyond individual boundaries, out of our particular cells and into those of other beings and things.

How do we become consciously aware of our connectedness? How do we grow into a sense of responsibility toward the poet's task? Each healing of self brings a healing to the world.

Jewish legend tells of the thirty-six hidden zaddikim of every generation. The zaddikim strengthen the link between person and divine, remind us of our relationship to God and others. They are wise and devoted, and without them the world, it is said, would not cohere. When one zaddik dies, another arises to take that place

(Friedman 31-33). Interestingly, “zaddik” is also Arabic for good friend or trusted one.

There are nuns, among them the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in Wisconsin, who continually pray for peace. Since 1878 these nuns have prayed during all hours of the night and day: “Bring peace to the world.” Maybe in their hearts, in silence, they say Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love. Where there are missile silos and the gleam of military gray, let there be fields of sunflowers and grasses. Perhaps their prayers and contemplation keep the world bound together, held in a net of love and compassion.

Who is to say what power for change zaddikim and nuns, poets and monks manifest? Who is to speculate what yet unfound law of physics they demonstrate? Each solitary act of selflessness, of acceptance, changes the world and its creatures. It feeds into the field of the species. It helps to make known the beings reborn in consciousness.

Allow the thought that transformation is possible. Expect the miraculous and the immediate, and it may manifest now, before it is too late for this turning of the wheel of becoming. Sanctify the life that is our gift.

For many millennia, words for *religion* were missing from the world’s holy literature. Early peoples did not split the sacred from the secular. All words were instilled with power and place. The earth was known, in all its multiplicity, to be holy.

Writer and poet Annie Dillard once proclaimed “I know only enough of God to want to worship him (sic), by any means ready to hand” (55). Where do we go to worship, beyond churches and temples and synagogues? Beyond meeting houses and long houses? Beyond pastures and bedrooms and boardrooms? We go to the empty page, the book of poems, the spoken word.

Let us take our worship to the table. Let us look at one another in a conspiracy of the chosen. Let us break bread at the table of the world.

In the past we sent out poets, prophets, seers, and shamans to explore the farther reaches of psyche. They bypassed the senses and reached the raw experience of nature that pours into the unconscious. They entered the world of dreams, myth, communion, and revelation.

The shaman and the inspired poet speak and understand the language of the creatures of this earth. In traditional cultures, they are healers. They adopt other identities, farflung and adventuresome. They employ spirit helpers and ancestors to carry their messages. They learn wisdom through illness or suffering. We turn to the

poet who journeys into the distant reaches of mystery and brings back visions and power needed by the human community. We begin to engage in a new intimacy with the planet.

Poets cross lines of psychotherapy, theology, magic, and medicine. They understand that illness and evil and apocalypse exist, yet refuse to align with these forces. They recreate balance, envision healing and light. They activate the aspects within us that honor the mystery of life.

All about us a new poetic presence rises up. A wise layer of the psyche is awakening, outfitted with the tools of the journey. In times of great cultural upheaval, this aspect of psyche takes on a pervasive role. The poetic ethos emerges in both theory and praxis, across disciplines and callings. Scientists and theoreticians of the new paradigm do wondrous work at this dimension of the psyche.

We are part of the great forward reaching thrust of evolution. We are part of the great surge of life and creativity that moves through all creatures from simplest to most complex. Evolution is a lineage, a progression, a surge, an erotic urge. A heartbeat that passes through each one of us and on to the next and the next. Through waking to ideals of compassion and service, the stream moves ever onward.

In Christianity we find the communion of saints. Every time we partake of the Eucharist, each time we eat the flesh and drink the blood, we are joined in a progression two thousand years old spread across the planet (Brown and Novick 1490150). In Zen Buddhism we find the dharma transmission, the carrying on of the lineage. Soto monks stand eye to eye with their Zen teacher--who becomes Vairochana, the Buddha who transmutes hatred into wisdom--to receive the direct transmission that connects them back to Shakyamuni Buddha, some two thousand five hundred years ago (Goldberg 202-215).

In the simple living of our lives, we come into contact with the lineage of all life. Through prayer and contemplation, by giving thanks, by opening to the wisdom of world and self, we realize this unbroken line that extends from the birth of our planet fifteen billion years ago to the awakening of a new consciousness. It extends from the many deaths (by meteors, of dinosaurs and other extinct species) to the possible death of most lifeforms on our planet. It calls on us to live a life of contained hope. It calls us to worship at the altar of the holiness of simply being alive.

In the following poem, I write about the sixth hexagram of The I Ching, a time of confrontation and spiritual maturing:

Conflict

It is not simply grains of colored sand,
I tell you. It is not simply a white scarf
and fruit laid before the Lama.

Even though a strand of my hair
(grown past my shoulders by then)
was cut at the crown to stubble,

I know the meaning of initiation.
Do not tell me it is mumbo jumbo,
or that I am a child of the devil.

Let me say it like this: I embrace unholy
sonnets; the sacraments of desire;
the revelations of the Qur'an

in their one hundred and fourteen suras;
a goddess seated in the lap of a god;
sweating in a lodge of cedar and stone.

But friend, let me lower my eyes
and break bread with you,
sip the grape juice that becomes blood,

tongue the wafer turned to a burning body.
I kneel before your teachings.

Call me what you will: pagan, infidel, child

of darkness. When I look at your body,
a radiance blazes from your limbs
where thirteen wingéd seraphim whirl.

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